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12/7/76

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

DECAPTIONED

PARTICIPANTS: Mr. Americo Grossman
Admiral Massera
Capt. Rodolfo Luqueta
Mr. Charles W. Bray, Deputy Assistant Secretary
Mr. Wayne S. Smith, U. S. Embassy

PLACE: Home of Mr. Americo Grossman

DATE: December 7, 1976

Before getting into the conversation itself, it would perhaps be useful to describe the background of the dinner at which it took place. I met Mr. Grossman when he was in Washington recently with two other visiting Argentine politicians. At that time he indicated he wished to extend hospitality to me during my trip to Argentina. Both the Embassy Political Section and I had the impression from Mr. Grossman that he intended to invite various friends of his from the Peronist and UCR Parties. Instead, Mr. Grossman informed the Embassy several days before my arrival that Admiral Massera had indicated he wished to have the opportunity to talk to me. Hence, he was to be the principal Argentine guest. According to Mr. Grossman, Admiral Massera had rejected his suggestion that another friend of his, Brig. Julio Gomez, the Minister of Justice, also be invited. According to Grossman, Massera stated that he wished to have the opportunity to speak with no other members of the Armed Forces present except his trusted confidant, Captain Luqueta, because he wanted "to talk cold turkey". It was apparent, therefore, that it would be an interesting and frank evening, but we had expected that Massera wished to talk frankly about the human rights issue. That proved to be not the case.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith and I arrived at the dinner before Admiral Massera. Mr. Grossman opened the conversation by recalling that when we had last spoken in Washington, I had asked about the human rights situation in Argentina. At that time, he said, he answered that there were indeed problems. There were still problems, he went on, adding that he was not in agreement with, and did not like what was going on in Argentina. However, he added, he believed it would be a serious mistake should the U. S. Congress, or Executive Branch of Government, "condemn" Argentina at this juncture. The present government, he said, was the most moderate one available and if it failed, something worse would replace it. It was, therefore, necessary to help rather than attack the Videla Government.

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He asked if in my opinion a trip on his part to the United States would be useful at this time. When he had been in Washington in October it had been suggested that he and his travel companions speak to Congressman Fraser. He had not considered it opportune at that point, but he thought it might now be so. What he wished to do, he indicated, was to go to the United States and talk to various key Congressmen, and other figures, with concrete evidence in his hands that the situation in Argentina is improving--evidence such as lists of those released, or of military personnel who had been killed by the terrorists, etc. (At this point he turned to Capt. Luqueta-who had arrived at the beginning of Mr. Grossman's exposition-to say that he would of course count on his friends in the military, such as the Captain, to see to it that such evidence was available for him to take to the United States.) He also indicated that although his Party, the Peronist Party, had been ousted from government by the Armed Forces, he believed he would also be able to take with him an appeal signed by the principal leaders of his Party not to condemn the present military government. The Peronist Party would make such an appeal, he said, because it realized that the present government was its, and the country's, best hope. (At this point Admiral Massera arrived and joined the conversation. Mr. Smith explained to Admiral Massera that Ambassador Hill had been unable to attend the dinner not only because he was recovering from an operation and was not feeling well, but because his wife had been taken ill that same evening. Admiral Massera expressed his regrets in not seeing the Ambassador, but indicated that he hoped to have the opportunity to see him shortly on another social occasion.)

When the discussion resumed, with Admiral Massera now a silent observer, I replied to Mr. Grossman that I was one who believed communication was always useful, but that I wished to give him some of the background and to foresee for him some of the questions he would doubtless be asked should he make such a trip to the United States. I thought he would then be in a better position to make up his own mind as to whether such a trip would be fruitful. First, I said, (speaking directly to Grossman) Argentina must bear in mind that the United States itself has just passed through 15 very difficult years. We had lost one president through assassination, another had stepped aside because his policies had been repudiated and a third had been ousted from office because he had violated the law. Further, we had suffered the trauma of the war in Viet Nam, and we had experienced our own terrorist problems, which differed from Argentina's only in degree. The United States has now emerged from these difficult years. Because of our recent difficulties there has been a certain turning back on the part of the American people to the basic values on which our country was founded. I commented that I was personally convinced it was because Mr. Carter had correctly interpreted this trend in the American body politic that he had won the nomination and then the Presidency. The American people, I said, clearly wish to see these fundamental values reflected in the public life of the nation, not only domestically but

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in our foreign policy. One of these values has to do with human rights. The Argentines must understand, then, that when various Congressmen in the United States raise this question, they do not do so as isolated voices, or as the result of some "leftist conspiracy"; rather, they are accurately reflecting the will of the American people and must be taken seriously.

Having given this background, I said I would like to predict several questions which Congressmen were likely to ask, should Mr. Grossman make his projected trip to the United States:

- A. A list of those who had been freed is a step in the right direction, but why can't the Argentine Government publish a list of those who are detained? I said one could not compare the Argentine Government with the Government of Pinochet, but I would wish to note that even the latter found it possible to publish a list of people who were being held by the authorities.
- B. The impression in the United States is that there are elements in Argentina, possibly connected with the security forces, who are kidnapping, torturing, and even killing, and that many of the victims have nothing to do with subversion. The question many people ask themselves in the United States is why these elements are not controlled and brought to justice?
- C. Why is it necessary to torture prisoners? I noted that Gwenda Mae Loken, a young American lady who had been tortured in an Argentina prison, was one of Congressman Fraser's constituents.

Up until this point the conversation had been between Mr. Grossman and myself, with Mr. Smith and Capt. Luqueta making occasional comments, and Admiral Massera simply watching and listening carefully. I turned to the Admiral saying that a frequent failing of diplomats is that they talk too much, and that I thought I might just have demonstrated that. I suggested that as a student of philosophies of government I would be most interested in his views of the guiding philosophy of the ruling junta and how it sees the future of Argentina.

Admiral Massera said he would be happy to discuss this. He said it was important that the United States understand the views of the military. Unfortunately, they had not always done so. It was only in recent years, he said, and especially under Ambassador Hill, that the Embassy had made certain it was informed, and could correctly interpret the views of the various branches of the Armed Forces.

He then said that before proceeding he would like to reduce the group. He wished Mr. Smith to stay to interpret, but he would appreciate it if Mr. Grossman and Capt. Luqueta would join the ladies at the other end of the room.

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Admiral Massera then stated that in what he might describe as the military party, two distinct groups have now defined themselves: the first supported unanimously by the Air Force and the Navy and by what he might call the Army of the Interior--that is, most of the corps commanders and other troop commanders. This first group is the majority one in the Armed Forces. It believes in a pluralist and democratic approach to political problems. It wishes to deal with political leaders who really represent their sectors, not simply with a few self-described leaders who represent no one. The other group, the minority faction, centers around the most senior leadership of the Army. He named specifically President Videla; General Viola, the Chief of Staff of the Army; General Liendo, the Labor Minister; and General Harguindeguy, the Minister of Interior. This group, he said, is undemocratic and wishes to proceed by making deals with unrepresentative leaders, such as ex-Interior Minister Angel Robledo, and the UCR's Ricardo Balbin. Balbin, he said, is a fine man, but no longer represents the majority of Radicales. Further, he said, the minority faction is linked to the left and is anti-American. He alleged, for example, that General Della Tea has been in communication with elements of the Montoneros, and, he went on, General Harguindeguy was one of those who participated in joint military Montonero civic action operations in 1973.

Massera said that this division within the Armed Forces was not directly related to the question of human rights which I had raised earlier in the conversation. He claimed, however, that it is the minority faction, led by Generals Videla and Viola, which is blocking the publication of a list of those detained, etc. The Navy has long wished to publish such a list, but has been blocked by Interior Minister Harguindeguy. Massera said that in a general way the human rights situation would be improved by the majority faction which he had already described.

Massera went on to stress that it is the Junta which is the supreme executive authority in Argentina. He said: "What we have here is a president who is not a president. He is indecisive, weak and has shown that he is incapable of handling even the responsibilities assigned to him, yet he is trying to place himself above the Junta." Massera added that during the visit of President Banzer of Bolivia the latter had made a diplomatic gaff in giving honors to the president and not to the Junta. Admiral Massera said he had told President Banzer that unless the latter "explained" this gaff, he and the Navy contingent would withdraw from the room. (Apparently the incident took place at a reception or dinner.)

Massera said this situation could not continue. Within two to three months there must be a "redefinition of power". He noted that he might retire as Commander of the Navy in the process. He stressed that he was not suggesting that there will be a military uprising to oust President Videla; rather, there will be a peaceful redefinition "because we are the majority and we

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are right". As a result of this redefinition, he said, the Junta will be reconfirmed in fact as well as in name as the supreme executive authority. There then might be a fourth key figure, who, whether called president or prime minister, would answer to the Junta, but who would begin decisively to administer and reorder the country in a democratic way. Admiral Massera said he was not telling us this with the idea of asking for U. S. support: which would clearly not be proper or feasible. He went on to say that as a citizen he was not concerned about the condemnation mentioned by Mr. Grossman, but that he was concerned lest some action, posture, or statement of condemnation by the U. S. help the minority faction to which he had referred consolidate itself. Such a condemnation, he said, would produce an anti-American reaction in Argentina which would play into the hands of General Viola and the rest of the anti-American minority faction in the Army.

"We do not wish you to do anything", he said, "but we believe it is extremely important that the United States maintain close contact with this majority faction in the Armed Forces which I am convinced will shortly govern the country". This contact was important, he said, so that the Embassy can report accurately the views of the majority faction and what is happening within the military party. He suggested that Mr. Smith should be the contact man. Admiral Massera concluded that he felt he had been indiscreet enough for one evening.

Mr. Smith and I expressed appreciation for the frankness of his exposition, but we made no comment at all on what he had said. I did say to Admiral Massera in parting that I believed it would be extremely useful if his government could take two steps:

- A. To publish a list of those detained, and
- B. to begin to bring to justice those responsible for excesses.

Admiral Massera took note of my points and having said what he had clearly come to say excused himself and withdrew.

Drafting Officer: WSSmith

Cleared By: ARA/Mr. Bray (in draft)

Copies to: The Ambassador
ARA/Mr. Bray

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